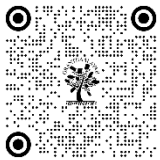


THE AILMENT OF THE INDIGENE: A STUDY OF THE SANTHAL WOMEN IN HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR'S 'THE MYSTERIOUS AILMENT OF RUPI BASKEY'

Dr. Suddha Kalyan Mondal ¹✉

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Rishi Bankim Chandra College for Women, India



Corresponding Author

Dr. Suddha Kalyan Mondal,
suddhakalyan7@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

'The Mysterious Ailment of Rupri Baskey' is the first novel to be originally written in English by a tribal author. It represents the cultural ethos of the Santhal tribe, their mythical core and belief systems, and their adaptation into the post-independence industrial urban life. Shekhar's ethnographic narrative posits the unique nature of the indigenes like Santhals vis-à-vis Indian modernity and upholds its integrity.

In my present venture I am going to look into how the author captures three generations of Santhal women. He celebrates the agency of the tribal women in their sexual liberation, independent choice of partners, habits of drinking and merry-making like men, and witchcraft. His representation of the economic emancipation of women epitomize the socio-economic changes in the post-independence India. My focus will be on the agency of the Santhal women in different contexts and how that resists the mainstream narrative of victimization of marginal women.

Keywords: Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, Ethnicity, Santhal, Gender, Agency, Paranormal

1. INTRODUCTION

Post-Independence socio-cultural-political hierarchy of India has mostly located the indigenous tribes of the sub-continent in a problematic and contested position. The term 'indigenous' itself has often been attributed with qualities as diverse as that of ethnicity, primitiveness, innocence, and also as people who lack/resist the urbane civilization or 'modern' culture. Bracketed as 'scheduled tribes' in post-colonial India, these indigenous tribes, termed later as 'Adivasis' thereby highlighting both their ethnicity and their implied distance from modernized urban India, are regarded as the noble savages who resist the inclusivity of urbanization, as highlighted by Prathama Banerjee, "'Tribal' culture itself here would be seen as a culture of subversive, marginal politics, not quite shared by mainstream Indian society...." (105). She underlines how it's maintained through ethnic dances, naming after tribal heroes like Sidhu, Kanu or Birsa, and cultural symbols like bow-and-arrow.

The Santhals are the largest of the indigenous tribes in India who are found mainly in the Eastern states of West Bengal, Orissa, Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand and Tripura. Their ethnic language is Santhali, a member the Austro-Asiatic

language family. They have been recognised as a separate ethnic group from 18th century onwards. Yet, 'faithful' representation of the Santhal tribe has been scarce for not being originally written in mainstream languages. They either veer into linguistic obscurities of their ethnic language or lack the 'authenticity' for being written by non-Sanths. 'The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey' is the first novel written by a Santhal in English, assimilating authenticity of experience with ease of linguistic accessibility. Questioning the subalternity of the Santhal community, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar (henceforth referred to as Shekhar) portrays the Santhal community as an empowered community located within their self-sustaining myths and culture. Emphasizing the importance of oral narratives, he uses the mode of auto-ethnography to show the 'Santhal' side of the narrative.

Shekhar's first major literary success 'The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey' revolves around the spatio-temporal journey of the titular character Rupī Baskey, her unusual illness and promise of recovery in the end. While seriously engaging with identity politics, the narrative cross-cuts into socio-economic changes in the Santhal people, and the simultaneous political and cultural developments. Rupī's marriage, being the strongest woman in Kadamdihi, her illness in the city, suspicions of black magic, emptiness of conjugal life, failure of allopathy, and her final settlement in her marital village resonate with the nuances of the Adivasi life, the uniqueness of their myths and their self-sustenance. This is highlighted by Khorda-haram, Rupī's father-in-law, who sustains the epistemological core of the Santhal society. The non-Santhal residents of Kadamdihi used to accuse the Santhals for their dirty habits, having cow and pig meat, or the prevalence of polygamy among them. When discriminated with untouchability, Khorda-haram highlights their ethnicity and indigenous right to the land. The narratorial voice of Shekhar engages in the contradictions between the universalizing voice of western historiography and the authenticity of the alternative narratives of the Santhal lives. His voice of the subaltern life constitutes a 'contingent' historiography, echoing Dipesh Chakrabarty, creating a narrative that contests the urban, elite and singular mode of history.

Following the same validation, Shekhar subverts from the majoritarian narratives of the Santhal women and their exploitation, often sexual in nature and their lack of agency therein. He creates an interesting saga of women characters across generations that deal with mythical rootedness, financial sustainability, subverted power-structures and also problematizes the binaries between good and evil, public and private discourses. An impressive character in this regard is Putki, Rupī's mother-in-law. The narrative represents three generations of Santhal men and women, and Putki belongs to the first generation, the narrative importance of her actual mother and step-mother being merely ornamental. Putki is the daughter of Somai-haram, the founder of Kadamdihi village and its headman. She can closely relate to the principles of Santhal life and the values of Somai-haram, though they are upheld more effectively by her husband Khorda-haram.

Putki is a non-conformist from her early childhood, who continues to resist parental control and sticks to her own ways. In one of the drinking bouts among women in the village, another woman proclaims, "All of us drink, but we don't go around pissing everywhere. Putki drinks like a man" (12). Public drinking is a part of regular Santhal life, but women usually don't drink with men, not even Putki in all her rebelliousness, thereby conforming to certain broader and more general guidelines of the society. What might seem more unusual to the normative society is her sexual liberation and exercise of free will regarding men. Though she is often talked about for her moral lapses, she is not criminalised, rather sympathetically looked at for being a motherless child.

In Kadamdihi the non-Sanths like the Kamar or the Kunkal who are Hindus considered the Santhals as uncivilised and impure not only for their eating habits but also for their practice of polygamy. Polygamy though is not regarded as a sinful activity among the Santhal society. In the Santhal religion 'Sarna', a woman's honour, social respectability, and acceptability are not equated with her virginity. She is not branded if she has one or more romantic or physical relationships with men before marriage. Like other mainstream religions of India, they are not forced to sacrifice their agency or free will for the sake of family or community honour. Questioned about this Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar said in an interview with Indian Express, "We santhals, I think, are comfortable with our bodies and the relationships we make before marriage is acceptable among the santhals... Relationship wise", he adds, "I think Santhal women and men have freedom that most other communities do not have" (<https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/books/i-feel-crippled-but-i-am-emboldened-says-author-of-adivasi-will-not-dance-on-dissent-and-the-ban-on-his-book-5042467/>). In the Santhal society it is normative to get married after having a child or to refuse marriage if they feel that the relationship is not working.

Putki and her best friend Della are symbolic of these women who exercise their free will which is further accentuated by their attainment of economic independence. Being a beautiful girl, Della's fame spread beyond her village and, "Before she turned twenty, Della had already been with two men and Putki, following her best friend's lead, had taken as many

lovers" (46). When Della chooses Tira, Putki opts for Salkhu, Tira's friend. After Della's marriage, she goes to live with Salkhu in his home. It was not very uncommon among Santhals for couples to live together before social marriage. If they felt comfortable with the relationship, the elders came and completed the formalities. But such live-in relationships did not curb their free will. In the words of Shekhar, "...a party of elders from Kadamdihi visited Horoghutu to either bring Putki back or to get her respectfully married to Salkhu....But Putki—a bored traveller who has seen too much in too little time—told the elders that she would like to return to Kadamdihi"(63).

Though they are called 'Chhinar', 'Daari', 'Kusbi' by other women of the village but their sexual profligacy does not stigmatise them, neither it bars them from a normative, respectable family life later on, as it would have happened in the rather 'progressive', 'urbane', mainstream cultures. Their individual worth resides in their humility, responsibility, and other virtues. Those who term Della 'a disgrace', also unanimously agree on her being 'a nice girl'. Della might drink like a man or might be called a whore, "...but on the inside, she was one of the best women the village had ever seen" (55).

The agency of Putki and Della become more nuanced when they start working in the rice-mill in Chakuliya. The narrative relates the journey of the Santhals community across three generations in the backdrop of India's political independence, the birth of democracy in the country, the struggle for and birth of Jharkhand, a state for the Adivasis of India, rapid industrialisation in the state, and depletion of its natural resources. Putki and Della's working in the rice mill is socially more radical than their personal adventures. Much later Rupri, Putki's daughter-in-law, questions the necessity of such decisions when she can't understand why such women from prosperous families ever needed to work (86).

They not only echo their men in terms of drinking or their love life, they also follow the men's footsteps into workplace and fields of politics. Growing up, these two, along with other older girls, used to stand by the road and chat with the men coming from work in the mills of Chakuliya. Imitating the male way of life among the Santhals, Della, Putki, and a good number of other girls joined the rice mills in Chakuliya. They were not shy of flaunting their femininity or celebrating their sexuality. Every morning they adorned their faces with talc, oiled their hair, wore saris low at the waist and "leave for the rice mill in a gaggle of giggling girls" (48).

Employment creates buying potential and commodity consciousness. The integral relationship between female agency and consumerist ability has been highlighted by Genz and Brabon, "...the notions of emancipation and agency are often directly tied to consumer culture and the ability to purchase..." (79) The same is highlighted by the narrator, "With their jobs came money and freedom. They bought more saris and cosmetics...." (48). They freely went to various social gatherings of the Santhals, drank to their hearts' content and met men who lusted after them.

Their exposure into the public domain makes them aware of freedom from the Ingrej (British) and the prospect of democracy. More importantly, they are excited at the prospect of a new state, a separate space for the Adivasis. With the rise of Adivasi Mahasabha, later rechristened as Jharkhand Party, this is the new utopia for the Adivasis—the main communities of Ho, Santhal, Mahlay, and Munda. Basking in the promise of a new exclusive land for themselves alone, Della and Putki start calling each other 'Reyar-Baha', the winter flowers who have a long way to go, harping on the dreams of a utopian tomorrow. Inspired by her husband Khorda-haram and his faith in the Adivasi utopia of Jharkhand, Putki also "voted in the first general elections of the country and became part of history" (71).

Like polygamy or flexible marriage norms that are used by other mainstream religions in othering the Santhals, another point of difference is their paranormal practices. Marked as an animist religion, 'Sarna' religion is actually a manifestation of nature and its spirits. Being closely linked with everyday life, they manifest both the good and the evil. Following the auto-ethnographic discourse, Shekhar describes the Santhal myths of origin and the myriad gods. In the holy shrines atop the hill there are five shrines apart from the shrines of Marang-Buru and Jaher-Ayo, the father and the mother in the 'Sarna' pantheon. To the right of the main shrine of Marang-Buru and Jaher-Ayo, stood the shrine of feminine power, of fertility. And the last shrine is the most unusual, just a plain patch of earth, no deity, no mound, no marking. This belongs to Sima-Bonga, the god of negative energy who brings disease and death. It bestows wealth on its followers, and is hence called Dhonkundra-bhoot.

Dahni-bidya or witchcraft is perceived as an exclusive knowledge which is secretly passed from one to another. But the individual can exercise her free will in choosing to be a witch or not. Della's mother is a witch but Della refuses to become one. She challenges the authority of this evil god by kicking it on its forehead when it comes to tempt her. Della refuses to become a witch and she leaves next day to marry Tira, freeing herself from her household which is under the evil spell of her mother who is a practitioner of witchcraft.

Shekhar represents the ethos of the Santhal existence by blending the magical into their 'everyday'. Not only the Dhonkundra-bhoot, witchcraft is also an integral part of their life. Perceived as evil and 'other' to such good women as Rupī, yet they are liminal figures in the villages. For the Santhals, women practicing witchcraft is as common as Santhal men drinking wine—"It is as natural as the wind blowing through the trees in a sarjom grove, as water flowing in the Kadamdihi stream" (37). The narrative though concludes with a whiff of change through Rupali, Rupī's daughter-in-law. Coming from a more urban background, she is practical and outspoken. She speaks out against Dulari and is able to prevail over others in her proposal of a separate house with modern amenities. Seeing Rupali, Rupī feels better, though nowhere close to her former self, after ages. Interpreting Rupī's ailment as a symbolic consequence of the ignorance and prevalence of paranormal activities among such ethnic tribes, modernity apparently provides a cure for this ailment.

Exclusive for the women, this is perceived as a skill, a knowledge of dark arts. But this is not stigmatised as evil. Firmly located in their narrow domesticity, their knowledge and practice of the art effectively promotes their position in society, helps them in retaining their youthfulness, and also enables them to resist the powers of patriarchy. She is "...engaged in a gory struggle for her survival as a woman." (Mullick, 354). Mullick also points out that through witchcraft a woman resists patriarchal taboos and tries to retain the cultural core that has empowered her. Somai-haram's first wife, the Older Somai-budhi, suffered a number of miscarriages and the public suspicion fell on Della's mother, naikay's wife, who was a known practitioner of dahni-bidya. The ambiguity of their existence and the potentials of their paranormal practices is underlined thus, "Despite her reputation...the naikay's wife was the life of every gathering. Her mesmerizing, maternal smile concealed the power which came over her on certain nights. This power which knew no difference of gender, caste, religion, community or village" (32). On ordinary days, she is just another Santhal woman, a practitioner of 'Sarna' religion, but on certain nights she joins the select group of witches and becomes supremely powerful. These women simultaneously participate in two worlds, two spheres of contrasting but not contradictory activities. Referring to the old aunt of the majhi's wife in Nitra, Shekhar points out this harmonious co-existence of "both their worlds: the social world of ordinary people and the world of women with special powers" (135).

The power of witchcraft enables these women to resist patriarchy and its latent power structures. They have a position of inferiority in 'Sarna' religion because a woman's body can't receive the gods and a female deity like Jaher-Ayo has to climb the body of a man (25). But through dahni-bidya, they can connect themselves with their particular god Bhaatu and the subsequent power, albeit negative in nature, can incite fearful difference from other members of the community. When Rupī meets naikay's widow and naikay's daughter-in-law, both practitioners of the 'dark' art, she is awed by the widow's appearance and her raspy voice. Though her words are ominous and alarming, they seem to captivate Rupī. In Santhal society, people are warned not to eat from witches as it would make them easy prey to their art. Rupī's perennial and incurable sickness is attributed to the evil machinations of Gurubari, but neither Rupī nor Sido can ever resist her. Though this Gurubari is a parasite in her life who thrives on sucking her life-force, she fails to break from her shackles. When she is taken by Sido to a Shaman or Ojha, a male practitioner of occult, Gurubari invades his inner sanctum. She is so powerful that the Ojha realises his inferiority before Gurubari. In fact, she is so powerful that the Ojha needs to save himself first from someone who has devoured a human being, referring to her achievement of the greatest possible sacrifice for a witch. When naikay dies or Khorda-haram dies or Bairam master dies, everyone agrees that they have been sacrificed by a witch. But the aura of their evil power is so great that nobody dares to challenge them, let alone prosecute them.

The power of the witches does not stem only from their knowledge of the occult or the recipe for the magic potion, it also comes from a keen assessment of people and events, an awareness of the normal as well as the paranormal. They seem to have an unfixing gaze upon others, focussed on not missing out on anything. On her first meeting with naikay's wife, Rupī notes how "she wanted to keep an eye on every object in that room at all times" (74). Her eyeballs never stop rolling across the room and she has a stare that "could look right through her, Rupī felt". Her daughter-in-law also possesses the same rolling stare. In Nitra, she is terrified to find that Gurubari has a gaze similar to that of naikay's widow and naikay's daughter-in-law. Her apprehensions regarding Gurubari are affirmed by her gaze. The unfixing gaze of the witches is a part of the hypnotic process that gives them access to more intimate knowledge about the victim and greater control over her, as is evident from the spell of Gurubari over Rupī.

The practice of dark arts does not nullify the prospects of social prominence either for the witches unless they engage in a struggle for power. For example, when Rupī moves to Nitra with her husband, she repeatedly sees the apparition of a very old woman with white hair smacking of the sweet scent of jasmine. This woman warns Rupī about possible evil spells that she must be wary of. Later she comes to know that the old lady is an aunt of the wife of the majhi

in whose house Rupī and Sido lived along with Gurubari and her husband. Actually this old lady and her two sisters were senior practitioners of witchcraft and she became a mother figure to both the majhi's wife and Gurubari. But she was thrown out by the majhi's wife when she suspected this aunt of sacrificing her son. Shekhar points out the good-evil binary in human nature and how adoption/rejection of dahni-bidya works as an extension of natural tendencies. He writes, "Evil has a way of bringing together the like-minded" (135). The majhi's wife is also a witch but she is also the headman's wife, attributed with due social prominence. In a similar manner, evil also enters the majhi-gushti of Kadamdihi through Dulari, Doso's wife. Coming from an insignificant background, Dulari supersedes both Rupī and Putki in daily affairs. The knowledge of witchcraft empowers her in usurping the authority over the head family of Kadamdihi, the ethnic core of the settlement.

The witches described by Shekhar in this novel betray a pattern of socio-economic similarity. They are either married to men who are less assertive or, in case of Dulari, are turned into a compliant husband. These women are able to upturn the usual inferiority of women in the patriarchal hierarchy of the Santhals with their paranormal attributes. The first witch in the narrative is naikay's wife whose husband is old and frail, and his son is a weakling. Though they are rich, it is believed to be a result of their supplication to the Dhonkundra-bhoot. Her social prominence is also perceived by Rupī on first encounter. Gurubari also hails from a very poor family but her marriage to Bairam elevates her socially. Continuing the parameters of gender subversion, we can locate here Gurubari's taking of Rupī's eldest son Jaipal whom she raises as her own and is also able to override her parental authority.

A nuanced justification of witchcraft comes from Dulari, Rupī's sister-in-law. Doso marries her for running the house. Her lack is underlined by Putki, "She's not the kind of woman I wanted for a daughter-in-law" (161). Locked in a loveless marriage, she is beaten mercilessly by Doso as well. The situation is reversed when her husband's lover dies mysteriously and Doso turns a servile lamb. Once Rupī was the strongest woman of Kadamdihi for her strength and responsibility. Now Dulari becomes the next strongest woman by the knowledge which "made her capable of controlling people by using charms" (173). Dulari exceeds all other witches by becoming also the leader of witches from non-Santhal groups like Kamars or Kunkals. She also tells Rupī that if good fails to achieve what's right, it's better to use evil to claim one's right. Therefore she problematizes the ethical perspectives on witchcraft and social practices. She shows Rupī how her goodness failed her in life. On the contrary, Dulari used her dahni-bidya to get what is rightfully hers. She points to Rupī how conventional ethics has often failed women like them. She problematizes the ethical binaries, "I had to reclaim what was rightfully mine. Tell me. Dai, did I do anything wrong?" (185).

'The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey' lends a voice of authenticity to this narrative of the marginalized, embedding it against the larger narratives of the birth of the post-colonial nation, urbanization, industrialization and its detrimental effects, and the (un)-rupturing of the indigenous lives. His ethnographic representation of women in the Santhal society shows their unique way of gender dynamics, cultural location of the women, and the particular knowledge and practices of these women which empower them. Questioning the modernist narratives of criminalization of occult and polygamy, or repression of women, Shekhar is able to hold up a geo-cultural historiography where women are able to retain their agency in terms of individual choice and role in the community and its culture.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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